A NOTE ON MODERN PAINTING

H. R. WACKRILL

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H. R. WACKRILL

With a Foreword by
ROGER FRY

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It is indeed with particularly poignant feelings that the author must always regard the following note, written only a few days before Mr. Fry's sudden death.

The great artist-critic's pre-eminence as a writer on aesthetics was, of course, widely acknowledged. His labours in the cause of art in this country, his splendid contribution to the elevation of the science of art-criticism, were activities that are too well known to need any stressing. But his personal kindliness and generosity towards other artists and writers were, of necessity, less widely known. To the author, for instance, coming to him as a complete stranger, he extended a generous and disinterested sympathy of a kind that must be rare indeed. And this was certainly only one out of very many examples of the same spontaneous goodness of heart. It is therefore especially to his sympathetic help and encouragement of young unknown workers in the same field that the writer would wish to pay his small tribute here.

H. R. W.

Foreword

THE situation of art at the present moment is one that must cause extreme perplexity to the uninitiated lover of art. So many separate sects have arisen, each holding its small group exhibitions and each putting forward a new aesthetic doctrine, that he may well wonder how to steer his way among so many cross-currents. Moreover, the recent vogue of certain German painters, such as Paul Klee, has brought into the writings of the more advanced critics the habit of treating art as though it were an exposition of metaphysical theories. These they expound with all the nebulous exuberance which is characteristic of German writers and of which until recently they had a monopoly. In such circumstances, then, it is a pleasure to me to find in Mr. Wackrill a writer who can be sympathetic to new manifestations and ready to welcome the possibility of new developments, and who yet manages to keep hold of general principles, and above all to express himself with remarkable lucidity and simple common sense. His work should light the way for many puzzled and discouraged inquirers.

ROGER FRY

Royat
August 1934

The author's grateful acknowledgements are due to Mr. Epstein, to Messrs. Alex. Reid & Lefevre, and to the National Gallery of British Art, Millbank, for permission to reproduce the works used to illustrate his essay.

'. . . They were not strangers in the country which lies just on the other side of a canvas, but though they knew and appreciated the amenities of the greater part of that country, yet other parts, those more recently discovered, they found unfamiliar and inhospitable. For them it was a hard, unromantic region, sadly wanting in literary interest, whose features were not swathed in mystery, nor did they melt into one another, but were harshly defined. . . . That land which lay in a constant unchanging light such as we experience on a grey day, where nights were of rare occurrence and moonlight discouraged as being too romantic. The inhabitants, for the most part harlequins or odalisques, ancient Greeks or nudes, were a very simple folk, living in apparently insecure houses amid a countryside strewn with loaves of bread and pipes, with apples and miscellaneous provisions; where the flowers grew in vases, and abstract and geometrical figures mingled with bisected guitars and bits of French newspapers. Nymphs, some sculpturesque, others of a curiously flat appearance, haunted streams that flowed with difficulty into a sea, on whose shores horses caracoled amidst dilapidated temples and broken marble columns.'

A Note on Modern Painting

In their attempts to render the exact colour of light the impressionists had painted pictures in which there was probably greater chromatic brilliance than in any that had been painted before, because most of the artists before them had tended to ignore the atmospheric colour of things and record only their local colour. They had expressed illumination by varying degrees of black and white added to the local tints, or at most they had not pushed their analysis of it farther than the warmth or coldness of the lights and shadows. Some of them, such as Rubens, Turner, and Delacroix, had begun to study atmospheric colouring, but the impressionists, with their greater scientific knowledge, were able to carry their researches very much farther.

But the weakness in their philosophy was that it subordinated composition to representation to an unprecedented extent. Orthodox impressionism, at least in its later stages when it was so much influenced by the photographic outlook, was a complete break with traditional art since in theory it repudiated design altogether. The spectral palette itself, as a recent critic has observed,[1] was an attempt to reproduce

[1] R. H. Wilenski, *The Modern Movement in Art.*

colour as it would have been reproduced by the camera; and it was artistically successful only in proportion as it failed to achieve its object. The best artists made it a vehicle for exquisite harmonies because, although theoretically it was a method of imitating the hues of nature, they employed it to construct colour-symbols. With the less good men, on the other hand, it came nearer fulfilling its aim, and their pictures were therefore only interesting as pseudo-scientific documents. Of course in actual practice some of the impressionists made good designs, but they were hindered very much by the prevailing regard for illusion.

In their methods the impressionists, with their interest in changing effects of light and their habit of working direct from nature, tended to finish their pictures at the point where the old masters began. Many of their paintings were like the sketches which the old draughtsmen made direct from nature and used as material for their finished pictures but did not consider as pictures in themselves. These often expressed with wonderful completeness and spontaneity a very simple emotional pattern or a series of unconnected emotions drawn largely from some actual scene. The artist would use them as a basis for the finished work which he would paint in his studio where his powers of visualization were unhampered by his physical vision. He would attempt to objectify a complex of emotions derived from the sketches and

from his imagined perception of the design itself, even if in doing so he might lose something of the freedom and spontaneity of his original studies.

It seems to be generally recognized now that the contemporary movement really began when some of its exponents became dissatisfied with the absence of architectural qualities in impressionism and tried to re-establish in their work the compositional tradition of the old masters. We may simply note here that the works of Cézanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Renoir, and Seurat all exemplify the predominant characteristic of modern art, the return to design. The reason why the first three of these artists are so often regarded as the pioneers of the movement is probably because, more than the others, they are typical of another characteristic of post-impressionism which is the tendency to abstraction, the tendency towards a less and less degree of representation.

II

In the early work of Cézanne the illustrative flavour was very marked and his paintings relied to a great extent on his sure colour-sense for their pictorial interest. He produced 'imaginative' compositions in the style of Delacroix and the Venetians, although he had very little natural gift for working 'out of his head' in that way. He executed portraits and pictures of still-life as well, but he was mainly

concerned with exteriorizing poetic ideas. Much of his time was spent studying the masterpieces in the Louvre, notably those of Rubens and Delacroix and the old Dutch and Venetian schools.

In the seventies the influence of Pissarro and the impressionists became evident in his adoption of a modified form of the spectral palette. Though the impressionists could not be said to have introduced him to the world of natural appearances, they led him to recognize more fully its inexhaustible store of aesthetic material for the artist, showing him what enrichments of design could be obtained by a closer observation of natural aspects than he had formerly made. It is probable that he also learnt from their deliberate, experienced technique a less altogether instinctive method of attaining his end; how his sensibilities might be controlled and his emotions organized and brought to their fullest degree of effectiveness by the operation of his intellect. But he missed in impressionism the element of design that he had found in the classics, and henceforth he began to attempt to solve what was to be his characteristic problem, how to bring back the results of the impressionists' colour researches into traditional painting, and to recreate the art of the old masters enriched by the new and brilliant colour that the impressionists had evolved with the help of scientific knowledge that the earlier men had not possessed.

With his growing consideration for the purely pictorial elements in art, for form and colour, there was a corresponding weakening of interest in its illustrative aspect. Here, as we know, he was in direct opposition to most of the artists of the period who were inclined to subjugate plastic values to 'literary content'. Many of them did so to such an extent that their work had no real existence as design and was in effect only a minor branch of literature.

When the painter is chiefly concerned with the illustrative aspect of his picture the formal side of the picture will naturally suffer. For example, suppose that an artist were painting a landscape and he felt that trees and hills were rather a dull subject by themselves and so he introduced some human note, such as an old woman collecting firewood or a shepherd with his flock, into the foreground of his work. The figure was put in, perhaps, to emphasize the loneliness of the shepherd's life or the hard lot of the poor, or in order to show the littleness and transience of man in comparison with the vast and immutable hills. But the artist overlooked the possibility that the shape of the ephemeral shepherd in the foreground might not harmonize with the shapes of the immutable hills, or that his spiritual loneliness might cause him to be physically isolated in the design. Or perhaps the red of the old woman's shawl would form too great a contrast with the green of the

landscape, or the large mass that represented the sheep might upset the balance of the entire composition, or the shepherd's dog might be running out of the corner of the picture and carrying the attention of the beholder with him. Above all he forgot that if his statement were well composed in the first place any addition must necessarily spoil it, and that if the addition were made the whole thing would have to be reconstructed.

Another example of the neglect of architectural qualities for descriptive ends could be taken from the same imaginary landscape, in the background of which the author might have shown a vista of hills that faded away into infinity. Such a passage might be good as a literary emblem of the distant, the unattainable and longed for, or as an expression of the idea of the unknown and therefore mysterious and romantic. But as a pictorial symbol, in so far as its 'mystery' was the outcome of lack of organization (and that characteristic would stimulate the literary imagination), it would be conflicting with the very essence of design.

Many of the artists in the latter half of the last century were sacrificing composition to subject in this way. Their productions were determined by an illustrative and not a pictorial necessity, and Cézanne's work was a revolt against this type of 'literary' art. He came to believe that the really 'imaginative' picture was not one in which the artist showed poetic

fancy in the conception of the subject, but one where he used plastic imagination in creating and arranging his symbols. He thought that for the painter true imagination was mental as distinct from physical vision, a faculty for visualizing form and colour relations, and that it could be exercised in conjunction with physical vision which it sublimated and controlled. In pursuance of that idea he gave up his earlier ambitions to create dramatic pieces; and though we find him, throughout his life, returning at intervals to the theme of the subject-picture the subject has become no more than an excuse for the design.

It is true that in thus abandoning all other poetry for the poetry of form he was continuing a reaction against descriptive art already begun by the impressionists, who had maintained that form and colour possessed a language of their own which was the only essential one for an artist to speak. But with Cézanne the conviction was intensified because he believed that if another interest besides the plastic were admitted into the picture the two would conflict with one another; and that for that reason form, to attain its greatest significance, must be winnowed of all reference to ideas associated with it. It was not enough for the literary element to be subsidiary to the pictorial, as far as possible it should be excluded altogether. This classical conception of the work of art as depending entirely on its own formal organization

was of great importance because it was to affect the whole movement that came after.[1]

Cézanne realized that the impressionists had to a great extent ignored design and he endeavoured to get back to a traditional art which should have the same architectural basis as the compositions of the old masters. He did not just reproduce what he saw; he set out to do with representational ingredients what the decorative designer or architect does with abstract ones.

What is the principle of abstract art? Is it not, instead of imitating pleasing objects, divining the scheme upon which their beauty is founded and creating a similar scheme? So in a work of decorative art like a carpet there is an arrangement of forms which are not taken directly from any life outside it but co-operate to give an intrinsic life to the design itself, enabling it to evoke feeling in the spectator. Even when some of the constituents are conventional imagery they have very little resemblance to their prototypes and are important only as abstract related shapes. A tree in a fabric is not a reproduction of any original tree, of an actual assembly of branches and foliage, but a series of structures, symbolizing an imagined tree, ideally arranged to fill a given space. So in abstract art the

[1] 'I call romantic any work of art which to produce its effect counts on the association of ideas which it sets up in the mind of the spectator. I call classical the work which to provoke emotion depends on its own formal organization.'—Mr. Roger Fry.

artist can perhaps be said to make an ideal disposition of forms and colours which symbolize imagined forms and colours, and this may be flat as it is in applied art or else three-dimensional as in architecture.

The value of the design depends on the co-operation of the various parts to make the whole. It is not sufficient for them to be good in themselves, they must also be combined into a satisfactory ensemble; and when that has been done it becomes impossible to alter the construction in any way without spoiling it. The harmful effect of such alteration is often seen when a new wing is added to a house. This may be excellent in itself but it is generally bad as part of the entire building because it destroys its original unity. In the same way the unity of the whole would be impaired if any bit of it were pulled down, or if any portion were rebuilt in a different style of architecture.

But the same laws of abstract composition obtain in traditional representational as well as abstract art, though the design is often obscured for the unpractised eye by the fact of the presentment. The imagery gives the picture or sculpture, as it were, a life reflected from outside existence, and the architectural element in it converts this outer into an inner vitality, like the intrinsic life of purely abstract art. Here also the composer makes a design of imagined forms as he does in non-representational work—the common quality in both of them is visualization, the artist's

capacity for framing mental images—but now these are more or less directly derived from something seen, and physical vision, or memory of it, becomes an important factor.

Cézanne therefore did not reproduce an accidental collection of separate objects; he constructed an ideal organization of shapes symbolizing those objects. Thus his pictures possessed an inherent virtue because they were built on the same principles as those underlying pure abstractions. And since they were composed of symbols evolved from things that he saw, they had beauty of the seen forms as well as a significance of their own. And again, it was not enough for their constituents to be merely pleasing in themselves; they had to 'go with' one another and with the whole, and be so arranged that it was impossible to alter the composition without destroying its unity.

He had also to design the colour in his paintings—though of course it is really impossible to separate the chromatic design from the formal. He transposed the individual hues of natural bodies into symbols which functioned together in a consistent whole (the colour-symbol, like the form-symbol, being something which stands for another thing but is not a copy of it). By inventing a colour-scheme he established a harmony between them that is generally absent in nature.

Preoccupied as he was with formal combinations

in which every item contributed to the final result, the images which he arrived at had a generic character. In his translations of the material world the emphasis was put on the universal analogies in particular objects rather than on the differences between them. He was less concerned with the features that distinguish things from one another and give them their personality and character than with the qualities which they have in common, the qualities which unite. Trees were not any special kind of tree, and still less were they individual members of a class; for such particularizing would have endangered the feeling of their relatedness. His tree-forms became embodiments of the idea of a tree, and so were capable of being related not only to one another but to all the other symbols as well, the houses or figures or earth-formations, which were themselves generalized in the same way.

And now a continuity of symbolism was established the essential structures could be enriched by his more intimate contact with the originals. Their particular natures were allowed to assert themselves, though never so much as to invalidate the first concordance. The claims of the individual object were admitted, and the main elements in the design being reduced by the artist's inner vision to a manageable state, his physical observation was brought into play in the treatment of their surfaces. The homogeneity of the symbols was mitigated, not by covering them up

with minor shapes which would destroy their hard-won congruence, not by adding any other forms at all, but by enlivening the surfaces of the original forms with all the delicate shades and cloud-subtle variations of modelling that his probing analysis could discover. The outer tissue of appearances, with its rufflings and agitations and least little movements, was analysed and re-analysed until it yielded its whole emotional significance. Thus the emotive capabilities of individual forms were utilized in a great measure without detracting from the force of the relationship; and indeed Cézanne often equalled the greatest of the old masters in, so to speak, holding the balance between the emotions of the outer and inner visions.

This frequent method of Cézanne's has been most admirably discussed by Mr. Roger Fry.[1] He says:

> 'We may describe the process by which such a picture is arrived at in some such way as this:—the actual objects presented to the artist's vision are first deprived of all those specific characters by which we ordinarily apprehend their concrete existence—they are reduced to pure elements of space and volume. In this abstract world these elements are perfectly co-ordinated and organized by the artist's sensual intelligence, they attain logical consistency. These abstractions are then brought back into the concrete world of real

[1] *Cézanne*, by Roger Fry, p. 58.

things, not by giving them back their specific peculiarities, but by expressing them in an incessantly varying and shifting texture. They retain their abstract intelligibility, their amenity to the human mind, and regain that reality of actual things which is absent from all abstractions.

'Of course in laying all this out one is falsifying the actual processes of the artist's mind. In reality the processes go on simultaneously and unconsciously—indeed the unconsciousness is essential to the nervous vitality of the texture. No doubt all great art arrives at some such solution of the apparently insoluble problem of artistic creation. Here in certain works of Cézanne we seem to get a particularly clear vision of the process of such creations.'

No doubt Cézanne's most momentous personal contribution to the evolution of painting was the reconciliation that he effected between classical design and the brilliant patchwork of impressionist colouring by making the colour (impressionist) reveal the form (traditional); his discovery or at least his exploitation of the idea of showing the volumes of things by the modification of their self-tints by the atmospheric colour. But it was to the abstract tendency in his pictures that his influence as animator of subsequent developments was chiefly due. This feature becomes most noticeable in his last phase. But the earlier pieces are also conventional to a lesser degree; and

here it is remarkable how strictly his outer vision was controlled by his perception when one thinks of the almost universal pre-occupation with visual phenomena among the men who surrounded him, before he retired to Aix and ceased to have much intimate contact with other artists. It is remarkable how he was never overwhelmed by what he saw as so often happens when a painter executes his finished works direct from nature. For Cézanne did this to a far greater extent than most of the great pictorial architects have done, a procedure necessitated by the impressionist and analytical side of his intention.

III

In his formalized constructions, and even more in those of Gauguin and Van Gogh, later artists found a new aesthetic sphere. Here were masterpieces that denied the impressionist dogma of literal fidelity to nature, and they began to investigate the whole subject of conventional art and the relationship of art and representation, finding that the design, the abstract element, was constant in traditional work while the degree of representation varied. The symbols might be very formal or they might be very like the objects they symbolized; the plastic language ranged from the conventional imagery of the primitives to the highly realistic idiom of Rembrandt or Vermeer. But however 'lifelike' it was, it remained

symbolic and never became just a transcription of the external world. So they began to realize that accurate delineation was irrelevant and that it was the fact that it was a design, and not that it was a presentment, that made a thing a good work of art. Once representation was recognized for what it was, a means to design and not an end in itself, the painters and sculptors saw the fresh and wonderful possibilities of an art that was not bounded by visual sensations. They realized that in traditional work physical vision had been only a stimulus to mental perception and that by subordinating it still more to the inner vision they could make a new imaginative art. They began to look at natural phenomena with the eye of imagination, and they looked at them with marvelling eyes because they had never seen them in that way before.

For an artist such an important revelation of a new aesthetic field might be the duplicate and counterpart of another earlier revelation in which the aesthetic field itself was first disclosed to him; though this would have been repeated in every aesthetic experience he had ever had, to a lesser extent. In the original experience he might perhaps have come into a room as a child and found it full of a white reflected light similar to that which is reflected in the morning when snow has fallen during the night. This drew his gaze to the window where he perceived the cause of the illumination; a cherry tree in full white

blossom just outside, shining so gloriously that, when the first shock of pleasure was over, he knew instinctively that the memory of that still presence would become an inalienable part of him.

IV

THE early post-impressionists recognized that art had gone between the two poles of less or more representation, sometimes inclining to one and sometimes to the other. But generally the tendency had been for the designer to introduce a greater degree of realism into his picture or carving or whatever it was he was doing. No doubt this bias was partly due to his growing intellectual curiosity about the individual structures of objects, and no doubt it was partly due, so far as painting was concerned, to the use of oil paint, which allowed a closer approach to nature than had been possible in other media. The perfecting of the oil medium must have opened out innumerable unexplored possibilities for the artist, its flexibility enabling him to utilize all kinds of fresh material that had not hitherto been available, and with his increasing technical skill he drew his inspiration more and more from the visible world.

But after he had been doing this for some time he began to allow his delight in verisimilitude to blind him to the claims of composition. The tendency, which after all was a very natural one, was for him



PEN DRAWING Matisse

By permission of Alex. Reid and Lefevre, Ltd., London

to be so moved by the charm of the individual objects he was portraying in his work that he neglected the design, the intrinsic beauty of the work itself. In his enthusiasm for the particular symbol that he was creating he did not make it co-operate with all the other symbols and the unity of the ensemble suffered in consequence. While the trend of the personal evolution of the best of the painters and sculptors was away from a concern with specific forms towards an even more perfect adjustment of the relationship between them, so that they would combine together and help each other to produce their effect, the course of the development of art generally was in the opposite direction. In practice this meant especially that the artist introduced a number of minor forms which, however delightful in themselves or as bits of the single structures of which the fabric was composed, did not harmonize with the other shapes in the arrangment. He might integrate the parts of each individual symbol but he often did not apply the same principle to the large design, and consequently the whole organization lacked the unity which each of its members possessed and people overlooked the incoherence of the whole for the sake of the parts. As design was covered over with more and more unassimilated detail, however, the symbols themselves started to disintegrate and their ideal arrangement deteriorated into the reproduction of some actual disposition of things in nature.

Even in the works of some of the most famous virtuosos, although there was unity of balance so that the ordering of the masses could not be altered, there was much less unity of consistency between the images; and the 'broad later manner' of many of them was simply the outcome of their recognition of the need for this sort of co-ordination. Later men had tended to elaborate the separate images more and more and as a result there was a competition of attractions between them. In order to mitigate this defect the artist would stress one detail at the expense of all the others so that the picture had the singleness of a unique interest though that interest was in a fragment and not in the entirety. Or like the impressionists he would obtain a physical semblance of unity by painting the whole scene a little 'out of focus' as the original would appear to the first glance of the beholder. The early post-impressionists on the other hand tried to construct their actual symbols so that they would harmonize and cohere with each other, as the finest pictorial architects of the past had done. They did not make what were virtually copies of the things depicted and then attempt to impose a superficial cohesion upon them by means of technical devices, but they let the unity of the ensemble determine the actual shape and placing of the symbols. This meant that they simplified, because what gives natural objects their variety is often on the surface and their underlying

essences tend to accord, so that merely by simplifying you establish a certain rough harmony between them. But the best designers did not stop there but used the natural forms to make equivalents which in a given arrangement, (since symbols and positions were interdependent), would combine into a whole. The inferior composers when they saw that simplification was characteristic of the work of the good composers also began to simplify, thus attaining an elementary homogeneity between the forms; but unfortunately simplifying alone will not ensure co-ordination as any second-rate advanced exhibition will prove.

Like many of the classical masters, the post-impressionists subordinated illusion to design, but they carried the process of formalization further than most of their predecessors had done because they believed that by freeing design from realistic conventions they might bring about the regeneration of art. The old painters had made such a thorough exploration of the visual emotions that it had become very difficult for the artist's work to be a real addition to his emotional experience. He had looked at so many renderings of natural aspects in pictures and sculpture that it was very hard for him to see nature except in terms of acknowledged masterpieces. And then photography had made it still more difficult to contemplate things with a fresh and personal realistic outlook. So that even the good realism, in which mental vision was by no means altogether

surrendered to physical, had tended to become more or less ingenious repetitions of what had been said before. The works of the very best men, it is true, were to a great extent original creations and had the same unprecedented quality that the inventions of the old masters possessed; yet even these were often in some measure derivative, and in the vast majority of cases the authors were so overawed by their predecessors' achievements that they could not conceive of any other point of view, echoing what the earlier practitioners had said as well as they could because they admired them so much. But now that reproduction was seen to be only an instrument of design the artist discovered in formalized art a way of recapturing his lost innocence of vision. By using his visual experiences not only as just material with which to make a design, but as matter for a far more abstract construction, as essentially a stimulus to his mental perception, he could enter into a new world of formal relations.

Naturally this did not happen immediately; the artists could not acquire an entirely fresh point of view all in a moment. They had first to try to forget all their accumulated experience of naturalism. And in order to help them to get this visionary conception of art they examined the formal compositions of the past in the museums, such as the paintings of the Italian primitives and oriental and Byzantine work. Only they did not regard them as models to be

imitated as closely as possible but as means to help them to acquire a visionary outlook of their own. Beginning to make a more abstract art they began to use less direct observation, and the symbols were conventionalized or simplified or distorted in accordance with a more imaginative idea without regard to naturalistic standards of resemblance to nature. It did not follow, however, at any rate at first it did not follow, that their things possessed less feeling of reality on that account. They might take less from nature, but the elements that they did select gained a peculiar poignancy from their very rareness. Considered simply as representation their pictures were far more convincing than any attempt at a complete description of natural forms, where the profusion of statements would diminish the force of each.

Because they advanced over a less extended area they penetrated all the deeper. And they were able still further to heighten the expression of their visual sensations by the use of distortion. It could be intensified to a far greater degree than was possible in realistic art where the distortion was never allowed to be so noticeable as to impugn the accuracy of the record. It could be raised to the highest pitch of intensity; though of course the sensations could not be pursued entirely for their individual worth irrespective of their reactions on one another, but had to be mutually related, and then that again enhanced their effectiveness.

Their work tended towards a less degree of representation. The emotions of physical vision were not ignored but the artists were inclined to rely more and more on those derived from imagination. This did not mean that they did not often paint from nature, but that in symbolizing natural forms they were impelled much less by their outer vision than by visualization of them as design. (Their paintings from nature might be far more imaginative than a naturalistic picture done without a model, for in the former imagination would be used to analyse and select visual material and to invent appropriate symbolic equivalents; while the latter, if it were merely a faithful copy of a memorization of some actual scene, could not be said to be imaginative at all.) And the abstract leaning was confirmed because they saw that, synthesis being all important, it was necessary to try to re-discover its first principles; and to do so they began to purify their work more and more of its mimetic traits. They reduced the ingredients of their compositions to the simplest forms in order to study their arrangement and their effect upon one another more easily. They were influenced by still more conventional art, like the archaic art of Greece and Assyria and Egypt and negro sculpture, and it was of course owing to this primitive inspiration that they got the name of 'fauves'.

People were inclined to take an unfavourable view of the new development because the artists looked

upon the images in their designs simply as interrelated organizations of form and colour capable of transmitting aesthetic feeling, without reference to them as presentments which might contain other non-plastic emotional allusions. Like architects, they dealt with pure form, and the average spectator is more intrigued by the subject of a painting or statue or whatever it may be and by the fancies which the design suggests to him than by the design itself. The reason for this is that comparatively few laymen are really sensitive to form or cultivate what plastic sensibility they have, whereas everybody feels emotion about forms and colours when they sufficiently resemble things in real life about which one feels emotion. So when most people look at a work of art they respond to ideas connected in their minds with the objects presented when those objects exist in the flesh rather than to the forms and colours which constitute the objects. That is why they are not generally very much interested in paintings of still-life; the ideas associated with fruit and vegetables and household utensils and all the paraphernalia of still-life pictures are not very interesting. But to the artist or the person who is susceptible to design the shapes and colours of these images can be just as significant as those of any other images, and indeed are often more so simply because the painter had no extra-pictorial considerations to divert his attention. An observer whose sense of form was developed enough would

hardly see anything else in a picture, or anyway it would only be when he had temporarily exhausted that aspect of the work that he would begin to notice what it was all about. His non-plastic response would tend to be shut off automatically and unconsciously when it was plain that the artist was not addressing that side of his receptivity, and when moreover he was perhaps manipulating form in such a way that it was necessary that it should be in abeyance.

But it was not merely that their things were not obviously illustrative that prejudiced people against the fauves. It was also the fact that they gave so little opportunity for the beholder to weave his own literary interpretation round the picture or sculpture. Their images were not sufficiently 'lifelike' to induce him to regard the scene before him as an extension of life and to continue its action in his own mind. They displayed none of those shrewdly observed, though as the artist thought, plastically superfluous details of face and expression calculated to set in motion a whole train of speculations about the histories and idiosyncrasies of the persons depicted. And as their work became less representational it was less capable of arousing the feelings connected in his mind with the physical appearance of things. The less realistic it was, the more the forms were considered purely as forms instead of as things—as trees, as people, as faces—the less fitted they were

to call up the innumerable thoughts and sentiments associated with trees and people and faces. The more it relied on its own constitution to arouse emotion the less purchase did it offer to the understanding of the beholder who was accustomed to look upon art as a means of stimulating his phantasies and memories of life.

And this was not all. Not only did the designer not provide any literary interest in his creations nor give any encouragement to the observer to furnish them with that sort of interest, but he seemed actively to oppose his doing so. If the spectator contrived to make up for what he regarded as the artist's deficiencies in this respect he would continually be baulked in the process by the artist himself. Where the work of art retained sufficient resemblance to natural objects to afford him an opportunity of endowing it with the feelings appropriate to such objects in life, no sooner did he begin to do so than his mood was abruptly dispelled by some inescapable perversion of natural forms, some manifest and wilful transgression of the nature of things. The excitement which he had engendered in himself was at once dissipated by the unpleasant scientific or eugenic associations evoked by the distortion. It seemed as if the artist had gone out of his way to extinguish a mood which he had not taken the trouble to arouse in the first place.

But from the artist's standpoint the distortion

was perfectly legitimate. To him with his highly developed plastic sense the emotions suggested by form could not be anything like as strong or lasting as those proceeding directly from it, and in the course of his aesthetic growth he had arrived at a point where he was almost exclusively engaged with form and indifferent to its human content. The deformation did not interfere with any associated thoughts because the associations no longer mattered. Moreover distortion, in the sense of obvious departure from the transcription of physical vision, was implied in his artistic attitude, his new belief in the redemption of art by imagination. Contemplating things with the inner vision, as related structures to be symbolized, he obviously saw them in a very different way from the naturalistic artist's way of looking at individual things physically. Mental vision had not been exploited for several centuries because the painters and sculptors were developing the aesthetic resources of physical observation, but now that he was no longer actuated by the same realistic motives he need not hesitate to disregard the conventions of illusionist imagery. Natural appearances could be treated with much greater freedom and he gladly availed himself of the new possibilities in formal combinations that his emancipation from realistic constraints allowed him.

Even to the amateurs who were able to value the purely formal qualities in a work of art the

new orientation was almost incomprehensible. The fauves inherited the impressionist unadulterated colour tradition but in every other respect their pictures were the antithesis of impressionism. The transition from impressionism, which was in theory the apotheosis of pure physical vision, to their very formal and imaginative designs was really an extraordinarily abrupt one. The artists were all trying to analyse colour with scientific accuracy and then in a few years they were making a more conventional synthesis than had been seen in Europe for hundreds of years, and so it was not surprising that people did not understand what the new movement was about. Even the more or less realistic work of the early post-impressionists must have seemed rather empty and austere to a public who were accustomed to naturalistic art in which the design was always ruthlessly sacrificed to the detailed elaboration of its parts. So it was inevitable that the fauves' productions should seem to them crude and childish and unfinished. It was not a question of their getting used to some new technical development or accepting a fresh aspect of natural appearances which had not hitherto been considered 'picturesque', but of understanding a change in the artistic outlook. A development of a former point of view is always sooner appreciated than a change in the outlook itself, the new beauty always appears ugly to most people at first. Any new spiritual excursion is naturally

difficult to follow at first but after some time it is obvious to every one. It might be compared to the journey of a boy walking through a countryside and dropping seeds from his hand as he goes. After the rustle of his footsteps among the leaves has gradually diminished, like rain that stops falling, until the silence has reinterwoven its branches behind him; and after the trampled grass has revived and stood upright again, it seems that the path of this Thursday's child is altogether lost. But presently the workers in the fields look up and see that the whole way he went is bright with flowers, which mark his course clearly step by step; a glad procession going up the hill-side, that, reaching the summit, pauses for a moment and then disappears.

V

And with the cubists we come, by way of Cézanne's geometrical symbolism ('the cube, the cone, and the cylinder'), his accentuation of planes and especially the non-mimetic attitude evident in some of the paintings of his last period, to the logical conclusion of the tendency to abstraction.

This achievement of a self-supporting unit whose significance, like the inherent beauty of natural forms, was entirely due to its own organization, and not partly the result of being a rendering of something beautiful; a synthesis which by appealing to the

architectural sense alone should gain an added expressive force, was the consummation of the trends of early post-impressionism. This was the pure spirit of nature divorced from its material manifestations, for the artists endeavoured intuitively to apprehend the principle of the beauty of natural objects and to re-create it dissociated from its outward forms. They essayed to make a new architecture, a 'visual music', a pure creation of form, a microcosm which, while possessing an inherent vitality of its own, should owe as little as possible to the outside world. Naturally it was much easier to get an effect with the aid of objects which were pleasing in themselves and which might divert attention from the weakness of the large organization, and in abstract work the design had to be very good to get any effect at all because the significance of the work was the design. (Of course the significance of a thing is always the design, but it is much easier to adapt a ready-made arrangement than to make an entirely new one.) They refused to depend on external reality and began composition again at the beginning. They studied the geometrical basis of good architecture and analyzed the abstract skeleton, the underlying geometrical structure in the inventions of the old masters. After they had been doing this for some time they were able to apply the results of their analyses to their own statements.

Purely abstract designs had not been made before

in pictures and sculpture, but of course all the best compositions had been abstract as well as representational; a fact that was generally overlooked by the spectator who had got into the habit of thinking of painting and sculpture as being simply a replica of natural appearances. It was not at all surprising that he should have looked upon them as a replica of natural appearances because that was just what the productions that he was accustomed to had become; the authors themselves regarded them as just that. They had lost touch with the tradition of design to such an extent that they had come to think of art as pure imitation. They argued that they got pleasure from looking at nature so that if they copied what they saw the result would give pleasure, forgetting that in the first perception the mind instinctively chose out those elements which most appealed to it and which induced the aesthetic mood. But during the actual process of painting or modelling that instinctive censorship was relaxed and they reproduced indiscriminately everything that lay before them whether it had contributed to the original excitement or not. Consequently their works had none of the animation and life that comes when an artist symbolizes the emotions he has felt for natural objects instead of just portraying the objects themselves; they had not even the affective appeal of individual emotions, let alone the enormously enhanced value of related feelings.

In this degenerate view of their function as artists they had been greatly encouraged by the invention of photography because many of them had begun to imitate the mechanical statement of effects of light given by the camera. The composer's ideal disposition of symbols degenerated into a copy of an accidental collocation of forms and the symbols themselves became transcriptions of lights and shadows. Formerly the painter had almost always made some sort of arrangement of equivalents, however much it might have been impaired by his over-concern with illusion, but now he began to use his eyes as if they were the lens of a camera and copy the lights and shadows on the objects he was depicting. The idea of the 'symbol', the form corresponding to a mental image, was lost sight of and was replaced by a mechanical reproduction of some natural form in a certain light.

And the spectator's thought answering the creator's, he too had come to regard 'fine art' in the same way, as something quite unconnected with architecture and decorative art, subject to different laws, or rather not subject to any. He did not stop to consider that fine and applied art merge imperceptibly into one another, that there is no definite point at which one ends and the other begins, and that if only for that reason it was absurd to treat them as two quite separate things. Stylized work, which might have served to link the two together in his

mind, was either overlooked or dismissed as the feeble attempts of uneducated or incompetent artists to paint naturalistically. In some cases he even imagined that it was only want of skill that prevented the old masters from producing the same kind of degraded naturalism that he was familiar with. When therefore the cubists insisted on the essential unity of plastic art by making non-representational paintings and sculptures their compositions were often quite unintelligible to him at first.

Accustomed as they were to think of art as a stimulus to the non-formal emotions of life, as a reminiscence or extension of everyday existence, people were at a loss when confronted by things which contained no apparent reference to the visible world. They had got into the habit of focusing their attention so exclusively on the picture as a record that they experienced the utmost difficulty in changing their point of view and accepting it for what it was in itself. Now that it relied entirely on its own organization they were obliged to fall back on their sense of design in order to apprehend it at all; a faculty that had grown weak through long disuse and was anyway much less developed than their curiosity about the form's meaning. And yet from the observer's standpoint many of the cubist inventions had one advantage over the work that had immediately preceded them. At least the degree of abstraction in them precluded any serious external



FEMME BLEU Picasso

Coll. Etienne Bignou

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interference with his recognition, such as it was, of their architectural qualities. The absence of illusion allowed him very little chance of imposing his own literary reading on the work of art, and so his formal response could not be affected by any violations of that interpretation like those which had often been caused in the past by the liberties that the artist took with the model. His architectural sense might not be nearly as acute as his relish for anecdote but at any rate it was not continually defeated by the inrushing of distracting associated ideas, as it had been in the case of the fauvist pictures where there was sufficient resemblance to the material world to evoke associations. The shapes were so different from those of nature that they did not contradict his knowledge of the structure of natural objects: the translation of appearances was carried so far that it ceased to be disturbing.

VI

GENERALLY speaking post-impressionism at this stage was occupied exclusively with form. The vast majority of the painters were no more 'literary' than the cubists themselves. But more recently the illustrative outlook has appeared again in surrealism where form is regarded as a medium for conveying the thoughts of the subconscious mind rather than as an end in itself. In some cases the practitioners give a

certain amount of attention to design, but very often they are not interested in it for its own sake at all.

Setting aside the more uncompromising surrealist productions in which there is no conscious aesthetic motive, we may perhaps bear in mind two considerations that seem to apply to illustrative art generally. Of course painting has often in the past been regarded simply as a medium for telling a story, but nowadays it is undeniable that photography and the cinema have superseded it to a great extent as a vehicle for that type of expression. In the case of the artist who attempts to combine both interests and make the form express the emotions of subject as well as its own emotions there is always the danger of his sacrificing the pictorial qualities to descriptive exigencies, however much he may revere them, simply because of the difficulty of concentrating on two things at once. Even when he has been able to communicate two different emotional patterns—one felt directly for the form, the other for its dramatic theme —without either being impaired for the sake of the other, it remains doubtful whether he has achieved absolute identification of these patterns in a single unit. And if such coalition is not achieved then the added appeal of association may be more than counterbalanced by the change of focus necessitated by two rival interests. But perhaps detailed consideration of this somewhat involved question is rather outside the scope of this essay.

The subject of a picture, being the expression of emotion felt for ideas attached to its forms and colours, is dependent on outside life, but its design has an inherent life of its own derived from the emotions experienced for the forms and colours themselves. So that the more a work of art depends on association the more liable it will be to the vicissitudes of everyday existence. The illustrative part may be affected by the varying mental outlook of different generations but the composition will be immune from those changes in thought and feeling. That is one reason why there are such decided modes in recognition where the painters who rely more on narrative are concerned, while there is less fluctuation in the response to the inventions of the more purely formal artists. And that is why so much of the old painting and sculpture that has survived has formal value. It was not that all the artistic performances of the past were up to the level of those that have been conserved, but that the work of the majority of the executants had a merely descriptive interest and was allowed to disappear as soon as that interest was exhausted; just as the pictures of most of the men of to-day will be destroyed when their subject is no longer fashionable. Design is universal and independent of place as well as time, whereas the feelings connected with it by associated ideas are often local in their appeal. People who are susceptible to form can understand a good work of art wherever it was

made and take the same delight in it that was originally experienced by the creator, while other people can get nothing from it because they cannot understand its meaning. Above all the affective power of design is far stronger and more lasting than the attraction of subject. This may be because, from the nature of visual art, the pattern of new and vital indirect emotions that can be expressed in it is much less complicated than that entertained for sheer form and colour. But whatever the explanation, it is certain that for the artist who is sensible to plasticity the human note is of relatively little importance; and this is the reason why many of the great masters, in whose early phases the descriptive element was pronounced, subjected it more and more to the architecture in their later periods, sometimes abandoning it altogether and coming through illustration to pure form.

Another result of contemporary recognition of the intrinsic life of a work of art is seen in the consideration given to the aesthetic potentialities of the various media. There is first letting the medium determine the nature of the design to be made, because a composition that is good in one medium will be quite unsuitable for another. In making a wood-engraving, for instance, from a pencil drawing of some particular scene it would be impossible to use the same kind of forms in the new material, since that has its own peculiar qualities which are allowed to modify

the original conception. Similarly in sculpture the character of the substance used may affect the idea it is to embody. And then there is the craftsman's feeling for his medium in the process of execution, the inherent beauty of texture in the surface of the material itself. The vitality that a work of art gets from its surface quality is not simply dependent on spirited brush-work or manipulation of clay. Real animation seems rather to proceed from the largely unconscious emotion which the artist has felt in the actual technical process, and this may be exteriorized without vigorous physical 'handling'. To give one example of this, a portrait sketch by Franz Hals does unquestionably derive a certain vivacity from the physical acrobatics of the brush-work. But most people would agree that its texture was quickened with less authentic life than, say, that in a painting by Chardin, where the vitality is of a less physical kind.

Now that the media are released from the burden of over-elaborate imagery their natural qualities have revived, and the modern artists have shown a new sensitiveness to technical aesthetic properties. But at the same time one can discern in post-impressionism a bias in the other direction towards the more complete subordination of technique, towards a more objective attitude in which the individual's expression of his sensual feeling for the material and his characteristic handling of it are not allowed to obscure

the impersonal ordering of form and colour; an outlook that seems perhaps more consonant with the general trend of modern art in its insistence on the priority of design. This juxtaposition of opposed attitudes in the same school is an example of its essential complexity, and that characteristic must always be borne in mind lest a review of post-impressionism should give a false idea of its nature. It should be remembered how much any examination of an artistic tendency must be a simplification, in which certain facts that are believed to be important are presented while others have to be omitted, so that the tendency itself is always far more intricate and indefinite than it appears to be from the account.

VII

Coming to the present day, we see how 'movements' generally have disintegrated, leaving the separate artists to consolidate what has been gained by their co-operative effort. It was natural that the rediscovery of artistic truths that affected them all should have drawn the post-impressionists together for the time being, but now that the premises are established they have become attentive to more individual problems. We see that some of them have continued making abstract or semi-abstract designs but that many of the original cubists have reverted to a measure of representation. No doubt we may

attribute this move partly to the immense difficulty of pure abstraction. For here, as in all very imaginative art, the designer has always to reckon with the aptness of his feeling to become exhausted through insufficient contact with reality; that ineluctable tendency for the imagination to repeat itself if it is deprived to too great an extent of nourishment from actual life. This inclination will perhaps be noticeable in his collective output where as it seems it will eventually result in the manufacture of formulae. Or it may show itself in isolated works to which it may give a purely decorative character since the variety and complexity which might be got from a more intimate contact with nature will be absent.

We see the majority of the painters and sculptors continuing to employ imagery, thinking that the emotions of the outer vision are too significant to be disregarded or treated as perfunctorily as they were by the cubists; emotions which often cannot be exteriorized without a certain amount of realism. (They cannot be expressed in applied art partly because of the intractability of the media, but chiefly because the useful purpose that such art has to serve unfits it for any great degree of illusion.) Only many of them believe that the mimetic elements must not be included in a work just because they happen to be present in nature; they must be incorporated in the fabric of the design lest the unity of the whole should suffer.

Where strict unity is the aim of the organization some of the potential significance of its individual members must be forgone. But then that is always the way in art, you sacrifice what is good for what you believe to be better: nothing is vainer than the eclectic idea of attaining perfection by introducing every possible quality into a composition. Because so many qualities are incompatible. There is always a struggle going on between the creator's joy in separate forms and his joy in their relations: an antagonism which is never wholly resolved and in which the advantage almost invariably lies with the former. When an artist concentrates on particular images, it is at the expense of their relationship, and in the same way though the efficacy of forms is increased by their alliance something of their potential individual interest is forfeited. Their nature is to some extent restricted, being determined by the need for co-ordination between them. This will necessitate a considerable amount of generalization; the specific characters of objects will not be able to be enforced since they are the result of attributes which differentiate things and make them not harmonious with one another. And as it is the underlying masses of things which tend to have a certain homogeneity detailed description of them will be impossible. However much contrast there may be between the symbols it cannot be so great as to destroy their essential harmony. The too particular or detailed will be



STUDY — Epstein

National Gallery of British Art
Millbank, London

avoided, and so will the too violent emphasis on any bit of the design in comparison with the rest, the fixed point of focus to draw the attention, the effect as of a bright mountain lifting up out of encompassing flatness. For unless all the constituents are more or less equally important, it is difficult for the mind to relate them together, so that this tends to prohibit the stressing of any one part for which all the others are no more than a background or setting.

Anything which makes it difficult for the mind to relate the forms is surrendered; gladly surrendered because the artist believes the renunciation to be worth while for the sake of the unity of the whole. He believes that the greatest and most abiding pleasure in a work of art is not secured by an inventory of separate effects but by their multiplication in design. His concern is less with individual forms than with the most perfect adjustment of the relationship between them so that they shall work together as efficiently as possible. He believes that by making his record a unity he is recording the inner aspect of things as well as the outer. Because he gives the presentment of the natural things the same unity as each individual organic natural thing tends to possess. In that way he gets the beauty of nature twice over. In painting a landscape he gets the direct appeal of the scene but he also gets its inner beauty because he intuitively organizes the picture-space on the same principle of related forms as that on which

each beautiful organic object in the landscape is constructed. The picture will represent lovely natural objects anyway, whether it is composed or not, but if it is well composed it will not only represent them, in a sense it will be a lovely natural thing. The composition reconciles the attraction of the thing seen with the significance of the thing itself. The representation is fused into the design, it becomes design, before it is admitted into the work of art.

(We can compare this fusion of imagery in design to the blending of form and light when a great flock of birds, flying in regular formation, turn all together in the sun, and catching the sunlight on their wings become momentarily birds of light.)

It is much harder to achieve an integral picture or sculpture than to make a series of isolated statements. Obviously a far greater mental exertion is required when every form has to be related with every other form and with the whole as well as with its prototype. It is difficult enough for the artist to communicate a simple emotion that he has felt, to hold and express adequately a sensation that is as fugitive as the comfortable or uneasy thought hovering on the borders of consciousness, which we only become aware of when it is already sliding back into oblivion and have to retrieve with swift and agonizing clutches. And how much more laborious to realize a whole intricate pattern of such feelings and, as it were, to halt the best moment in the shifting pictured

play of relations. And then if the composer makes a mistake in an unsynthetized or partially synthetized work it only means that that particular fragment will not be quite as good as the others. But a weakness in any part of a co-ordinate scheme will have a detrimental effect on the whole organization because it is one thing and all the parts are mutually interdependent.

No doubt it is to some extent the infinite difficulty of the planned structure which accounts for the number of artists at the present time who seem to be reacting against the idea of the rehabilitation of synthesis which has underlain the whole contemporary movement. It is inevitable that there should be a great many men to-day who are just continuing the academic outlook in a 'modern' technique. But even among those who appeared originally to acknowledge the supremacy of design there seems to be a defection from the concept of the planned unit, and this may be attributable to the fact that post-impressionism has no longer the charm of novelty, and they are discouraged by the difficulties of putting the idea into practice. Or it may sometimes be because they have not altogether understood the implications of fauvism and cubism. For these movements have drawn attention to the enduring nature of the abstract factor in art, so that the creator now ought to be in a much better position than that of many of his predecessors, especially in the second

half of the last century, who had lost touch with the classical tradition to such an extent. Even in the works of the early post-impressionists, even with Cézanne, the representation does not always become design; there are pictures in which the architecture seems to suffer from too strict an adherence to visual phenomena though there may be no definite point at which one can say: here the balance was lost and the artist was swayed too much by what he saw physically. But to-day the fundamental importance of unity appears to be evident and many of the artists are attempting to go beyond Cézanne.

And since it is only in conventional work that real unity is attainable, and stylized art being a relatively unused mode of expression, their designs are conventional. Painters and sculptors have cultivated their visual sensations for so long that it is natural that they should be turning now to the boundless potentialities of the inner vision. When the old masters were continually assimilating new visual data there was less impulse to survey the subjective world; external reality was fresh and unused and they eagerly explored it for material for their compositions. But now it is the inner scene which can provide fresh matter and the artists are exploring that and making the representation in their work subservient to the design as many of the old painters did, but by subjecting physical vision still more to imagination they are making a new sort of beauty.

And because of the very fact that it is still comparatively new, it is bound to seem ugly to most people at first until experience has made it familiar to them. Only some people will not allow themselves to experience modern art. They are prejudiced against it from the beginning by the idea that pictures and sculpture should conform to a certain standard of resemblance to nature and this conviction will not allow them to look impartially at anything which is not realistic in treatment.

It is here that the discussion of first principles may be useful. Obviously no amount of talk can furnish any one with a ready-made susceptibility to present-day things; only familiarity with such work can give the observer a real appreciation for it. But an analysis of the movement may be able to help him to get rid of the misconceptions which prevent his natural sensitiveness from responding to the modern idiom. It cannot increase his formal sensibility, but it is justified if it can remove preconceived ideas about the nature of art which hamper the exercise of that sensibility and so enable him to cultivate it himself. That is the main justification for reviews of the contemporary movement, for ultimately the approach to art is always an individual and an emotional one, and as such is beyond the reach of any other person's ideas.

When people have lost this academic bias it is only a question of their experiencing, not only post-

impressionism, but any work in which physical vision is obviously subdued to imagination, before they will be able to enjoy modern art as children and unsophisticated people do, whose instinct has not been overlaid by false education. When this bias has been overcome the mind will be ready to admit the new conception, and it may be that, having entered the unconscious thought, it will remain there for a long time seemingly quiescent, like the small flame that lurks at the heart of a heap of dead leaves. The mind will not be conscious of the profound change that is taking place within it, but one day the spectator will suddenly feel the significance of some particular work of modern art and welcome it as if it were an old friend. The action of the original experience, which was unnoticed at the time but was the cause of the ultimate change of feeling, will be like that of the fire that smoulders beneath a heap of dead leaves, that a man comes across while walking in the fields in the evening. He smells the smoke of the bonfire a long way off and as he comes nearer he sees it, smouldering for a long time, quite unattended; until, just as he reaches it, because of a sudden breath of wind or for some unknown reason, suddenly the spark will suffuse the whole mass and it will burst into fiery blossom for his delighted view.

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